

## Reclaiming and Resisting Bourgeois Norms in Central Park's Mall and Bethesda Fountain

The Commissioners' Plan of New York, enacted in 1811, sought to bring Republican order and balance to the early Manhattan cityscape. This plan confined the spaces within the city to a repetitive gridiron street plan, leaving little room for experimentation in the architectural constructions of the expanding city. But as the city quadrupled in both land area and population size from 1821 to 1855, reformers began voicing the need for a great public park. Such a space would not conform to the tightness and uniformity of the gridiron plan. Instead, the plan would open up the potential for new, unprecedented social productions of space in Manhattan. Following the New York legislature's designation of a 700-acre area for the park, a competition was held by the Central Park Commission to find a landscape design plan that aligned with the city's visions and ambitious aspirations. American writer and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and English civil and topographical engineer James Croes won this competition, and alongside their plan submitted a report for their proposed usage of the land. In "Preliminary Report," we can see how Olmsted and Croes' plan was loaded with sanitarianism and elitist undertones. Although Olmsted and Croes' language makes it clear that they detest the gridded Commissioner's Plan, their report still demonstrates a desire to, like the city grid, impose a specific socio-political order upon the cityscape. When we compare the social productions of space outlined in Olmsted and Croes' "Preliminary Report" with the social productions of space witnessed in today's Central Park, particularly the Mall and the Bethesda Fountain, we can find hegemonic ideals engrained into the conceived layout of space that are actively resisted against and reclaimed by today's users of the space.

An observation of the 1811 Commissioner's plan ([Figure 1](#)<sup>1</sup>) provides us with a glimpse into the regularity and inflexibility that architectural projects were constrained to in the first half of the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Janvier, Thomas A. "The Evolution of New York: Second Part." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. June 1893.

century. Prior to the construction of Central Park, all building sites stayed within the topographical bounds of the rectangular 200-feet wide blocks that repeated throughout the cityscape. Throughout their “Preliminary Report,” Olmsted and Croes criticize the limitations these boundaries caused for the imposition on bourgeois norms. Firstly, Olmsted and Croes argue that these perimeters prevent the institution of culture. Olmsted and Croes state:

So far as the plan of New York remains to be formed, it would be inexcusable that it should not be the plan of a Metropolis; adapted to serve, and serve well, every legitimate interest of the wide world; not of ordinary commerce only, but of humanity, religion, art, science and scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

Olmsted and Croes believed that the plan does not provide adequate room for creating spaces of bourgeois culture. Clearly using the European city and European garden style as reference, the design of the Bethesda Fountain within Central Park illustrates Olmsted and Croes’ attempts to reinstitute a space of culture that uplifts “humanity, religion, art, science and scholarship.” [Figure 2](#) shows the fountain’s angel sculpture that sits centrally atop the pool of fountain water and [Figure 3](#) shows the intricate carvings on the Bethesda Terrace’s architectural features including its ramps, balustrades, and piers. Particularly when we contrast the sparing usage of space within the Bethesda Fountain and Terrace to the crowdedness of the 1811 Commissioner plan, Olmsted and Croes’ social ambitions become clear: the architects wanted to create a space for the upper class to spectate, from a variety of angles, the iconography of the intricately detailed architecture. The European visual motifs, that have little relevance to the working class, illustrate the architects’ intentionality in designing the space for the upper-class users who would understand and appreciate these sculpted features.

Olmsted and Croes’ “Preliminary Report” also illustrate moralizing sanitarian ideals. The language of sanitarianism transformed Central Park into a surveilling apparatus for the “proper” (or

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<sup>2</sup> Olmsted, Frederick L. and Croes, James. “Preliminary Report of the Landscape Architect and the Civil and Topographical Engineer, Upon the Layout out of the Twenty-Third and Twenty-Fourth Wards.” *Document No.72. New York City Board of the Department of Public Parks*. December 20, 1876., 3.

upper) classes to use, and solidified Central Park's function as a *cordon sanitaire* that would separate the upper classes from the lower classes within the city. In the "Preliminary Report," Olmsted and Croes repeatedly condemn the spaces of the working class using charged language. The architects describe working class city blocks as having a "large amount of ill-ventilated space, which can only be imperfectly lighted through distant skylights, or by an unwholesome combustion of gas"<sup>3</sup> which they compare to their vision of upper-class spaces that contain "habitable rooms of pleasing or dignified proportions."<sup>4</sup> Olmsted and Croes' detestment of the tight, poorly lit, poorly ventilated spaces of city blocks physically manifested in their design of the Mall that utilizes wide boulevards surrounded by lush green space (illustrated in Figure 4). The architects designed a space that directly contrasted with the tight streets and alleys: upper-class users of the space could walk and ride horse-drawn carriages up and down the Haussmanian boulevards of the Mall. Within the wide, open artificially constructed topography of paved pavilions surrounded by gated-off greenery, the upper class could promenade about the space constructed for bourgeois norms of leisure. The Mall provided a space where the upper class could enjoy the clean air and natural light, separate from the crowded blending of classes within the rest of the gridded city.

When we look at today's Central Park, we can observe a preservation of Olmsted and Croes' conceived designs. At the same time, however, we see a very different social production of space from the architects' intentions. The Bethesda Fountain and Terrace no longer sit as bourgeois objects of mere spectatorship. As shown in Figure 5, people of diverse backgrounds sit directly around the basin of the fountain, violating its intended use as an object of art observation. When I visited the Bethesda Fountain, people crowded around the fountain for various socializing purposes, both seated and standing. A group of environmental activists next to the fountain were teaching about water, but I could barely hear what they were saying amidst the massive congregation of simultaneous conversation. While Olmsted and Croes intended for the fountain to be an object of spectatorship and quiet contemplation, today's Bethesda Fountain is a space for people to meet friends, converse with strangers with mutual environmental

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<sup>3</sup> Olmsted and Croes., 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 5.

passions, enjoy dipping their feet in the cool fountain water, throw their coins for luck into the fountain basin, take casual photographs, *and also* walk around and observe like Olmsted and Croes intended (but today's walking and observation is not limited to the upper class). Workers on a lunch break, tourists, casual non-working regulars, street vendors, and students alike reclaim the Bethesda Fountain space as their own with conversation and non-uniform movement.

We can also observe a very different social production of space from Olmsted and Croes' vision within the space of the Mall. When I visited the Mall, two adults stood twenty feet apart throwing a frisbee back and forth to each other, without any caution towards the passing walkers or any hesitation towards chasing the occasionally flying off frisbee into the gated-off green space. Olmsted and Croes would detest these adults' unruly usage of the Mall space but today's users of the Mall space simply detoured around these two individuals or observed the entertaining spectacle. As we can see in [Figure 6](#), rather than carriage space, today's Mall's wide boulevards are used for local street vendors to sell their handmade artwork on either side. One street vendor that I talked to sold jewelry with resin ornaments embedded with flowers that she had hand-picked from the gated-off greenery of Central Park. Rather than serving as a space for bourgeois seclusion and working-class surveillance, today's Mall is reclaimed by working class artists and users of all demographics as a space to buy and sell items while simultaneously enjoying the landscaped greenery designed by Olmsted and Croes.

Although Olmsted and Croes designed Central Park with the intention of making it a cordon sanitaire and a bourgeois space for spectation and sanitarianist segregation, today's Central Park users actively resist against this design, instead reclaiming the park as a socializing space for individuals of all socioeconomic backgrounds. As we can see in the Bethesda Fountain and the Mall, people use Central Park, not only for the enjoyment of clean air and natural light that Olmsted and Croes intended but also for the intersectional sharing of goods, ideas, and space.

## Figures



Figure 1. 1893 Redrawing of 1807 version of 1811 Commissioner's Grid Plan



Figure 2. Closeup of Bethesda Fountain and Angel of the Waters sculpture





Figure 3. View of Bethesda Terrace looking in towards Bethesda Fountain



Figure 4. View within the central boulevard of the Mall



Figure 5. People sitting on and standing around the Bethesda Fountain.



Figure 6. Local artists selling their art alongside the boulevard of the Mall.

### **Bibliography**

Janvier, Thomas A. "The Evolution of New York: Second Part." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. June 1893.

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